

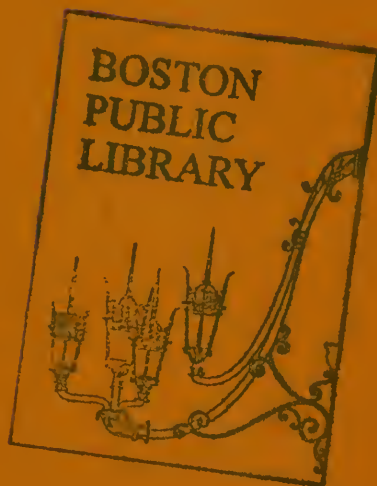
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MT. VERNON CHURCH



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Back Bay
B126
1972

Historic Preservation Statement

MT. VERNON CHURCH

492 Beacon Street, corner Massachusetts Avenue

Robert B. Rettig

Project Director

Boston Landmarks Commission

January 24, 1972

Mt. Vernon Church was built in 1892 for the Mt. Vernon Church Society, previously housed in a Greek Revival building (now demolished) on Ashburton Place. The architects were Walker and Kimball (C. Howard Walker, 1857-1936, and Thomas R. Kimball, 1862-1934). The builders were Whidden and Company.

Before the church was built, the land was vacant, part of the holdings of the Boston and Roxbury Mill Corporation. Most of the rest of the block was built up at the same time, a development undoubtedly stimulated by the 1890 opening of the Harvard Bridge to Cambridge. At the time, Massachusetts Avenue was known as West Chester Park.

The major exterior feature of Mt. Vernon Church is the square tower at the corner of Beacon Street and Massachusetts Avenue. Until 1937, this tower was surmounted by a steeple. The principal entrance to the church is through three sets of double doors facing Beacon Street. Inside, the T-shaped sanctuary has a gallery above the entrance, a small apse at the opposite end, and a heavy open-timber-framed roof. The rear portion of the building, entered from No. 6 Massachusetts Avenue and extending to Back Street, contains on the first story a small chapel (created in 1944 out of two Sunday School rooms) and a large hall. On the second floor are a parlor (above the chapel) and another large hall, this one with an open-timber-framed roof. There are other subsidiary service rooms on both floors. The basement is mostly unfinished.

The principal contribution of the building to the Back Bay lies in its handsome stonework (Roxbury puddingstone trimmed with freestone) and in the variety it offers to the continuous rows of bay-windowed houses and apartment buildings on both sides of Beacon Street. In addition, it is a major visual feature at one of the most heavily travelled entrances to the Back Bay.

Mt. Vernon Church is the latest in date of the nineteenth-century Back Bay churches and does not have the cachet of having been designed by a "name" architect, such as H. H. Richardson. Nevertheless, both for its period and in its context, it is a commendable piece of architectural design. It is also the only church building in the western half of the Back Bay; the earlier, better known churches were in the easterly blocks (Arlington to Exeter) and around Copley Square.

Mt. Vernon Church is now vacant and unwanted by its owner, the Mt. Vernon Church Society, which has allied with Old South Church. The question of preservation of the building hinges on the possibility of adaptive use, since there is little likelihood of finding another congregation to take over the building at a time when most city churches are struggling to keep alive. In a portion of the Back Bay dominated by educational institutions, it seems logical to propose adaption of the building for educational purposes--ideally, auditorium and classroom space, for which the costs of conversion would be minimal, since the building was essentially designed for such purposes.

If no institutional purchaser can be found, the building may have to be demolished and replaced by another structure with another use--probably housing. This alternative is acceptable only if the replacement structure is of at least equal design quality--by no means a certainty, especially if low or moderate income housing is involved. Under no circumstances should the present Back Bay zoning limits be exceeded. The current maximum (seventy-foot cornice height and ninety-foot total height) is the most that should be allowed, whatever reuse is proposed for the site. Even if the existing zoning envelope is adhered to, the resulting building could well be more obtrusive, less varied and interesting, and built of less solid and handsome materials than Mt. Vernon Church. Therefore, before the existing building is automatically written off, careful consideration should be made of the alternatives, and appropriate institutional purchasers should be actively sought. While not of national or even city-wide importance, Mt. Vernon Church is a notable building at a major Back Bay gateway, and its thoughtless destruction would be a serious loss for the district.

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